

## Is slow what the slow university's about

Article (Published Version)

Martell, Luke (2013) Is slow what the slow university's about. CelebYouth.org.

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## Is Slow what the Slow University's about

We shouldn't fetishise speed at the fast university. This distracts from what's behind it. And we should ask whether [slow](#) is what the [slow university](#)'s really about.

Behind fast academia is the [marketisation of higher education](#): high student fees, the incursion of private providers, universities becoming like businesses, and a changing style of management. These are turning universities into competitive money-seeking missions. Managers try to get as much out of us as possible and chase indicators that focus on quantity more than quality.

University CEO [Edward Acton](#) measures progress through the time students work, advocating a separation of teaching and research contracts to push up study hours. This gets emphasis over quality, equality of staff, free time, resources or depth.

It's a far cry from a Harvard Dean's [advice to his students](#): to slow down, get more out of university by doing less, be careful about opting for short degrees, take a term off, go abroad, do what they want rather than what they feel they have to, leave things for later in life, think of their health, not juggle too many extra-curricular activities, and not try to be perfect.

Changes to universities are happening when power weighs heavily to employers over labour. Unions have become weaker. Top-down management is replacing [slower consultation](#) and inclusive governance. Academics are individualistic more than oriented to collective action.

Aside from speed, lecturers [work long hours](#) and juggle obligations. PhD students, postdocs and new academics try to kick off their careers under harsh conditions. The most low paid and insecure, cleaners, caterers and many support staff, barely get a mention when the university's discussed. Women have to achieve more to advance and so are under greater pressure.

Social media, blogs and e-communication produce a speed and volume of information to keep up with, and the expectation to be constantly in touch, especially relevant to knowledge professions and jobs where people work away from the office. We juggle simultaneous information from many media sources. There isn't space and solitude to contemplate before moving to the [next bit of knowledge](#). But access to information and the possibility to publish from below is progress, while exposing us to expectations and the use of electronic communication by those in power.

We shouldn't treat speed, quantification or technology as if they're independent processes or causes themselves. This conceals what underpins them. There's a push to extract the most from workers, and our own feeling we have to perform. What's behind these is the business university taking over from the university that's about education; with employment at the end of increasingly managerial and capitalist types of power. Zooming in on slow diverts from these underlying causes, and so where solutions need to be.

And what's slowness about? Speed and time may be a symptom, or part of the issue. But slow may not be the real end, or the means.

Amounts of work aren't the same as speed. And some aren't against lots of work. They're for autonomous work in free time, for instance creative or voluntary kinds, as well as space for non-work things like family and friends. One [labour-loving academic](#) mentions control over timing and location of work as what's important.

Speed may not be the issue, but speed all the time. Some of us want to push ahead when we're doing something we're excited about, but to have time when we slow down. So it's about balance. But even this doesn't go deep enough. The issue isn't balance, but control over the balance.

Lots of things grouped under slow are about quality of life. Slow's re-introducing human and well-being priorities. Speed is part of these. But the key is autonomy and the ability to reclaim our lives for ourselves and have control of speed. Underlying this is power.

A major aspect of power and autonomy is that we're wage labourers, in the employment of others. Managerial control of employees is increasing in the business university. To escape the impositions of this on pace and volume of work, and freedom, there are three solutions.

One is individual withdrawal from paid employment, going part-time, self-employed or freelance. Some who do this still have lots of work and a life of speed. But because they're freer from institutional employment they feel liberated. So autonomy rather than pace and volume of work is the issue. For others quantity of work, long hours and pace of life is the concern, and is why they withdraw.

But it's easy to say slow down and take more time for yourself. Who can afford this? More structural solutions are needed.

A second solution's reducing hours in paid employment, so there's a greater realm of autonomy. Marx and Keynes argued that technology allows the production of abundance with less labour. Andre Gorz said we can redistribute work from those who have it to those who don't, so all have work but all work less. This could be enabled by a universal basic income, allowing us more free time.

A third solution's control over the workplace and overthrowing employment by others. We've had social ownership by the state, under state socialism and social democracy. There are other forms, such as workers co-ops, where people collectively control their work.

You can regain power and autonomy within capitalism through withdrawal or pools of co-operative ownership. But lack of self-determination over work's inherent in a system of selling your labour. The solution is reducing employer-worker relations, employees regaining control over their work and non-work lives, which means greater communal ownership. This goes against the capitalist system, which is about private ownership and the employer-wage labour relation.

What can we do in universities? One thing is fight for the democratic [public university](#), which we never really had, but we had more than now as managerial power's marginalising staff and students in governance and consultation. Staff are treated more as employees subject to management control and students as consumers, rather than citizens of the university. There's a shift from inclusion in decision-making to 'engagement' via consumer surveys about changes already made. A public university with [inclusive governance](#) is

needed. If the issue isn't slowness itself but control over speed and work this can help with that.

A second solution, aside from public universities and increasingly private, business, money-seeking higher education, is [free universities](#). They're set up and run by their [staff](#) and students, autonomous and [free from](#) the state, market and profit.

This is what's behind the pace of universities: power, and so the need to pursue autonomy from power; not to be slow necessarily, but to control speed and our lives. This shouldn't be on the basis of business criteria, put into practice by capitalist and managerial power; but on the basis of what's good for humans, and under our own control.

by Luke Martell

Posted with links on [celebyouth.org](http://celebyouth.org) December 2013